Security Council

Sixty-second year

Provisional

5683rd meeting

Thursday, 24 May 2007, 10 a.m.
New York

President:	Mr. Khalilzad	(United States of America)
Members:	Belgium	Mr. Verbeke
	China	Mr. Wang Guangya
	Congo	Mr. Ikouebe
	France	Mr. De Rivière
	Ghana	Mr. Christian
	Indonesia	Mr. Kleib
	Italy	Mr. Spatafora
	Panama	Mr. Arias
	Peru	Mr. Ruiz Rosas
	Qatar	Mr. Al-Nasser
	Russian Federation	Mr. Churkin
	Slovakia	Mr. Mlynár
	South Africa	Mr. Kumalo
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Sir Emyr Jones Parry

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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07-35671 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President: In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to Mr. Lynn Pascoe, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs.

It is so decided.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda. The Council is meeting in accordance with the understanding reached in its prior consultations.

At this meeting, the Security Council will hear a briefing by Mr. Lynn Pascoe, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, to whom I give the floor.

Mr. Pascoe: Recent events starkly illustrate just how volatile the Middle East conflict remains and how sizeable the obstacles are to progress towards peace.

One immediate concern must be ending the violence that has erupted in Gaza and has extended to southern Israel. The longer it continues, the greater the risk of escalation, and the greater the threat to both the survival of the National Unity Government and to the prospects for any fruitful Israeli-Palestinian dialogue. Leaders on all sides have a responsibility to do their utmost to rein in the violence.

In Lebanon, we have also seen a dangerous outbreak of violence. The armed clashes between the Lebanese Armed Forces and the Fatah al-Islam gunmen around a Palestinian refugee camp have added a new and explosive element to an already tense situation.

The factional fighting in Gaza erupted soon after the resignation of Palestinian Interior Minister Hani Kawasmeh on 14 May. It included brutal urban warfare involving clashes of Hamas militants and Executive Force members with Palestinian Authority security forces and Fatah armed gangs. The Karni crossing was attacked by Hamas gunmen, as was the home of a senior security official affiliated with Fatah. Battles took place in residential areas, with no regard for the safety of civilians. All told, the upsurge in inter-factional violence this month has left 68 Palestinians dead and more than 200 wounded.

The Secretary-General has repeatedly called for an en to the violence. Egypt is to be commended for its continuing efforts to mediate. In order to address the situation comprehensively, Palestinian leaders must live up to their responsibilities to bring law and order to areas under Palestinian control and to reform the security forces.

Rocket fire against Israel escalated significantly, with more than 270 rockets fired during the reporting period. Rockets have hit homes and schools in Sderot and the Israeli Government has declared the area an emergency zone. An Israeli woman was killed on 21 May. In addition to the other aforementioned casualties, many residents have been evacuated. The Secretary-General has emphasized the need for the rocket fire to cease.

In response to the rocket fire, Israeli tanks entered the Gaza Strip for the first time since the ceasefire was agreed in November last year. The Israeli Air Force has conducted air strikes aimed at militants and facilities. However, there have been civilian casualties, including six family members of a Hamas Legislative Council member, who were killed in a single strike on their home. All told, in Israeli-Palestinian violence this month, militant rocket fire has killed 1 Israeli and injured at least 16, together with dozens treated for trauma, while Israel Defense Forces (IDF) air strikes and ground incursions have killed 57 Palestinians and injured at least 175 others, with children accounting for six of the dead.

While recognizing the right of Israel to defend itself, the Secretary-General has called on Israel to ensure that its actions do not target civilians or put them at undue risk. All parties must abide by the basic tenets of applicable international law. The Secretary-General has spoken to both President Abbas and Foreign Minister Livni and has urged them to do all possible to calm the situation and to exercise control and restraint, respectively. With rocket fire continuing, militants threatening to resume suicide bombings and the Government of Israel announcing its determination to intensify its actions, there is a great danger of escalation.

United Nations operations and personnel face real dangers. On 7 May, an internal Palestinian clash outside a school in Rafah operated by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East left one person dead and eight injured, including two children. British journalist Alan Johnston, who was kidnapped on 12 March 2007, has not yet been released. There has been no further movement on the release of Israeli Corporal Shalit, who was captured by Palestinian militants on 25 June 2006, or on Palestinian prisoners. Yesterday, Israel arrested some 30 Hamas officials, including elected mayors and legislators. The most prominent arrestee is Mr. Nasser Eddin Al-Sha'er, the Palestinian Minister of Education, who was active in the negotiations to form the National Unity Government.

There has been no action towards a freeze in settlement construction or in the dismantlement of settlement outposts. Nor have the settlers I reported on last month been evicted from the buildings in central Hebron despite an order from the Defence Minister. In early May, a plan for three further settlements in East Jerusalem, comprising another 20,000 housing units, received preliminary approval. The Secretary-General has expressed his concern about these plans and stated that a halt to settlement expansion is one of the basic obligations in phase one of the Quartet's Road Map. He noted that, as occupied territory, the final status of East Jerusalem is subject to negotiations between the parties. Construction on the wall continued throughout the reporting period, contrary to the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice.

This month there was slight improvement in movement in the Jordan Valley. However, commitments to ease movement and access in the West Bank remain unmet. A total of 549 physical obstacles to movement were in place as of 15 May 2007, a slight increase from last month. Closure levels have doubled since the Agreement on Movement and Access was concluded 18 months ago. Serious action is long overdue. A recent World Bank report underscores the relationship between Israeli restrictions on Palestinian freedom of movement and continuing Palestinian economic collapse. Obstacles and a permit regime have divided the West Bank into 10 economically isolated enclaves, denying Palestinians access to some 50 per cent of the West Bank.

In the Gaza Strip, the number of trucks exporting in April was only 11 percent of the targets decided on in the Agreement on Movement and Access. Due to the upsurge in violence, Karni was closed between 15 and 20 May and has reopened only sporadically since then. As of 21 May, the Rafah crossing was open for only five days of the month. It is good, however, that the European Union Border Assistance Mission at Rafah is being renewed.

United Nations staff members and other humanitarian workers crossing into Israel continue to face arbitrary and sometimes humiliating treatment by Israeli authorities. The United Nations continues to follow up access issues faced by our staff and other humanitarian workers with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The recent United States decision not to block bank transfers to Palestinian accounts, the re-establishment of the single treasury account and the ongoing efforts by Finance Minister Salaam Fayyad to re-start a transparent and accountable budget process should be welcomed and supported by all. The Norwegian Government plans in the near future to transfer $10 million to the Palestine Liberation Organization account. We also welcome Arab efforts to provide financing but stress that the major step required is the resumption of the transfer of tax revenues withheld by Israel, now amounting to approximately $1 billion. In addition, the temporary international mechanism continues to provide a transparent, efficient means to transfer payments to public service providers and the most vulnerable Palestinians.

In the reporting period, Israeli politics have been dominated by the release of the interim Winograd report, which was critical of the conduct of last year's conflict with Hizbullah, while noting that there had been inadequate attention given to trying to reach peace agreements with Israel's neighbours. The final report is due to be released in August.

There have been no further bilateral meetings between Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas since 15 April. The next meeting is tentatively scheduled for 11 June. United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice postponed a planned trip to the region. However, the United States-proposed benchmarks on security and Agreement on Movement and Access implementation have been shared with the parties. These benchmarks reportedly provide for enhanced operations at the Karni and Rafah crossing

points, as well as for easing the restrictions on movement in the West Bank and between the West Bank and Gaza.

Efforts to promote the Arab Peace Initiative, which was reaffirmed by Arab League members at their summit meeting in Riyadh in March, have continued. During the reporting period, dialogue took place between Israeli, Jordanian and Egyptian officials at the highest levels, including a meeting of Foreign Minister Livni with her Jordanian and Egyptian counterparts in Cairo on 10 May, and Prime Minister Olmert and King Abdullah of Jordan on 15 May. A ministerial-level follow-up meeting is anticipated in Israel in the coming weeks.

Quartet members held a positive informal exchange of views in Sharm el-Sheikh with members of the committee of the Arab League tasked with implementing the Arab Peace Initiative. The Secretary-General strongly encourages all concerned to continue to discuss the next steps required to benefit from this important initiative, which provides the framework for a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, consistent with Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973). He will continue to convey this in his discussions with the Quartet when he joins them next week in Berlin.

I shall turn now to Lebanon, where the security situation has deteriorated drastically over the reporting period. On 20 May, heavy fighting erupted between the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Fatah al-Islam gunmen in Tripoli in northern Lebanon and around the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp. The fighting began following a police effort to arrest, in Tripoli, Fatah al-Islam militants suspected in a bank robbery which had taken place a day earlier. The militants resisted arrest, and a gun battle ensued which spread to the surrounding streets. Fatah al-Islam gunmen subsequently attacked the Lebanese Army positions at the entrance to Nahr el-Bared refugee camp, killing soldiers. Heavy fighting continued through Monday and Tuesday. According to security and the media, approximately 32 Lebanese soldiers and 22 members of Fatah al-Islam have been killed since the fighting erupted on Sunday.

The situation faced by civilians in the camp is extremely difficult. According to Palestinian sources in the camp, thousands initially fled their homes on the edges of the camp, where fighting was most intense, to shelter deeper inside the camp. During a truce on Tuesday and Wednesday, at least 15,000 refugees fled the camp. Dozens of homes are reported to have been destroyed, and civilian casualties and public health issues are reported to be mounting. Much of the camp's supply of medicine, water and electricity is reported to have been interrupted.

Because of the heavy fighting, UNRWA has been able to send only one convoy to the camp to provide humanitarian assistance. Three of the six convoy vehicles were completely destroyed or heavily damaged when the convoy came under attack. Fortunately, there was no report of any injury to staff. Although it has not been possible to confirm them independently, reports indicate that at least 27 civilians have been killed and approximately 70 others wounded since the fighting erupted.

Major Palestinian factions in Lebanon expressed concern over the incidents and dissociated themselves from Fatah al-Islam. Palestinian representatives in Lebanon, together with several Palestinian local leaders, continued their meetings with Lebanese officials to ensure the safety and protection of Palestinian civilians during the fighting.

The Lebanese Government has expressed determination to confront the group and has also reiterated its position that only the Lebanese Army and security forces should carry weapons. There has been general Lebanese and Palestinian support for that approach. However, there are real concerns in Lebanon that instability could spread to other camps.

The Secretary-General and his Special Coordinator for Lebanon have issued statements strongly condemning the criminal actions of Fatah al-Islam as attacks on Lebanon's stability and sovereignty. The Secretary-General has called on all sides to do their utmost to protect innocent civilians. He deplored the attacks on UNRWA's humanitarian supply convoy and called for the immediate establishment of safe corridors to allow medical staff to assist and evacuate those in need. The Secretary-General has maintained close contact with Prime Minister Siniora of Lebanon and has talked over the phone with leaders in the region, including King Abdullah II of Jordan and the Foreign Ministers of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Syria. He has spoken with the Secretary-General of the League of Arab States, Mr. Amre Moussa, and notes the statement of

the Council of the Arab League supporting the efforts of the Government of Lebanon to maintain peace and stability.

In addition to the events in northern Lebanon, on the night of 20 May a large explosion in Beirut killed one person, injured at least 18 others and caused extensive damage to buildings in the Achrafiye neighbourhood. On 21 May, another powerful terror attack took place in Beirut's Verdun neighbourhood. There were no reports of fatalities, but hospitals confirmed that at least seven people were wounded. On 23 May, at least 16 people were injured when a third explosion targeted the main commercial street in the town of Aley.

Last month, on 23 April, two youths whose families support the Progressive Socialist Party of Walid Jumblat were abducted and murdered. Political and religious leaders from across the spectrum in Lebanon condemned the killings, called for calm and asked their supporters to exercise restraint and allow the competent authorities to deal with the perpetrators.

In southern Lebanon, the strength of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) stands at just over 13,000. During the reporting period the overall situation along the Blue Line remained calm, although there have been a number of tense stand-offs between IDF and LAF soldiers at various points along the Line. In all cases, swift intervention from UNIFIL has helped to de-escalate the situation.

Ongoing tensions have also been reflected in a number of provocative billboards erected by Hizbullah. In addition, Israeli aerial violations of the Blue Line have continued on a regular basis, in direct violation of resolution 1701 (2006). The United Nations reiterates its call on Israel to cease its violations of Lebanese airspace.

Finally, pursuant to the presidential statement issued on 17 April 2007 (S/PRST/2007/12), the Secretary-General informed the Security Council, in a letter dated 23 May 2007, that arrangements for dispatching an independent mission to Lebanon to assess the monitoring of Lebanese-Syrian border security have concluded. Security circumstances permitting, the mission will be dispatched to Lebanon early next week.

In conclusion, as the Council is aware, the Secretary-General has appointed Mr. Michael Williams as the new Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and his Personal Representative to the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority. I had hoped that the new Special Coordinator could be with us today, but the Secretary-General has dispatched him urgently to the region. He begins consultations today with senior Israeli and Palestinian officials, and will then travel to Cairo for meetings with the League of Arab States and the Government of Egypt. He will brief the Secretary-General before the Quartet meeting to be held in Berlin on 30 May.

The President: I thank Mr. Pascoe for his briefing.

In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I now invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion of the subject.

The meeting rose at 10.25 a.m.